

# Towards a redemptive pedagogy: Koinonia as a basis for transformation in a faith-based social enterprise in Cambodia

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## Abstract

Despite strong progress over the past 30 years, Cambodia continues to face socio-economic challenges in the areas of gender inequality and human trafficking. This study explores an approach within an Australian faith-based social enterprise operating in Cambodia to create a 'redemptive' pedagogy in the form of a curriculum and learning community that develops and supports women socially, relationally and spiritually as they leave the sex industry and reintegrate into Cambodian society. Consistent with the faith roots of the social enterprise, the study drew on the concept of *koinōnia* and how this is understood and applied in Cambodian faith communities by interviewing eight Cambodian faith and/or vocational education leaders and facilitating focus groups with a further four Cambodian educators and six students. The evidence was analysed using a grounded theory methodology to create a model of two interrelated communities. The first community is characterised by being open and inclusive and encourages fellowship in a safe and dignified environment and through loving, honest and trusting relationships. This community feeds a related secondary community characterised by a spiritual, practical and relational dimension. This article further outlines a proposed curriculum that integrates the Beatitudes and leverages these concepts through peer-to-peer learning and concludes by outlining areas for further research.

## Introduction

Cambodia is a Southeast Asian nation that has seen significant development over the past 30 years as it recovered from the earlier civil war, genocide and occupation. While results have been economically successful with relatively high and consistent growth in GDP, it has been accompanied by social impacts that include growing inequality and widespread human trafficking – including sex trafficking. Cambodia is ranked in the top 10 nations in the world where modern slavery occurs (International Organization of Migration, 2018) but has seen recent improvement (Walk Free, 2023). Contributing factors include poverty (Bendana, 2018) and a poor rule of law that make human trafficking and prostitution more attractive.

The impacts of human trafficking and forced prostitution in Cambodia on human well-being are felt socially, relationally and emotionally. The mostly female victims have faced ongoing exploitation with one report noting how 38% of these women had entered the industry because of their virginity being bought (Brown, 2007). This exploitation often starts with the family, with reports noting around 75% of women entered the sex industry through the influence of a trusted family member, neighbour, or community member (Derks et al., 2006). When in the sex industry, women (and particularly those who were trafficked) are susceptible to higher risks of sexually transmitted infections, sexual abuse and HIV/AIDS and their often-limited education and vulnerable economic position make these women unable to escape the industry (Derks et al., 2006). Even among women who ‘voluntarily’ entered the sex industry, many face limited economic options or deception (International Organization of Migration, 2018). While individual stories may differ, evidence highlights a need for a holistic solution to address the physical, social, relational and economic challenges faced by these women.

Cambodia has a range of Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) focused on supporting these women such as Hagar, the Cambodian Women’s Crisis Centre, Daughters of Cambodia and Agape International Missions, to name a few. While each NGO has a different mission, many are faith-based and recognise the need for holistic redemption and offer services that may include education, family care and employment (Bendana, 2018). While the many transformed lives attest to the success of these programmes, these NGOs are often limited in their scope and sustainability as they operate using a ministry or crisis centre model (Bendana, 2018) and may not provide long-term vocational training or alternatives that provide employment for women to complete their programmes. These factors point to the need for vocational education that can be delivered within faith-based NGOs or social enterprises to provide support and sustainable employment outcomes.

The study addresses this need by exploring how a community and curriculum can help create redemptive outcomes in a faith-based NGO or social enterprise based on the Greek concept of *koinōnia*. The study begins by exploring the historic and ecclesiastic concept of *koinōnia* in Ancient Greek politics and society (Stephanides, 2022) and early Christian communities (Sakupapa & Nalwamba, 2017). It then applies a grounded theory approach to explore Cambodian Christian leaders' perspectives of *koinōnia* before integrating these insights into a proposed curriculum and community in a social enterprise to create inclusive and dignified learning.

## Koinōnia as the basis for community

From the earliest passages of Scripture, there is a clear emphasis on relationships. Christian theology emphasises how the triune nature of God is bestowed in humanity as they are made in His image (Puffer, 2017), so every person has an equal measure of the image of God irrespective of their qualities, class, wealth or gender (Marshall, 2001, pp. 57–58). While this concept, *imago Dei*, is a basis for individual worth, it requires a community to realise and affirm this (Marshall, 2001, pp. 58–60). In community, the *imago* fully reflects their nature to others (Henderson, 2015, p. 148) and is expressed in the Eucharist where the Apostle Paul believed humanity can know and express *imago Dei* irrespective of ethnicity, religion, culture or class (1 Cor. 10:16, Gal. 3:10-11) in communion with God and each other.

The New Testament term often used to describe this community is *koinōnia* which derives from Ancient Greek concepts of community, fellowship, joint participation, partnership and a shared gift, collection or contribution (De Maré, 2018). The root word, 'koinon' or "common to all" (Kenney, 1985), speaks of a community ranging in size from a single family to a polis who share a common goal (Stephanides, 2022). Despite differences in size, class and individuals, *koinōnia* provided unity around a central purpose and a sense of civic and collective identity for those living in the Greco-Roman world.

Balancing the tension of unifying individual identity with collective diversity was possible for Greeks through a sense of proportionality and collectivism. In its broadest form, *koinōnia* appealed to a collective identity held by individuals in separate Greek city-states who identified with others who held a 'common' language, custom or character (Stephanides, 2022). In separate city-states, there was a 'common' culture where everything from dialogue to resources should ideally be "shared among friends" (Forst, 2017). This duality suggests *koinōnia* may help societies bridge divides caused by genocide or apartheid (Marumo, 2019) or to advance or express 'democracy' (International IDEA, 2022). Given Cambodia's troubled history and efforts to build democracy, *koinōnia* offers a unique perspective relevant to the Cambodian context.

While *koinōnia* has a rich etymology and a long history in the Greek language and Christian culture, it is infrequently used in modern political discourse and has no direct English or Khmer translation. Despite a resurgence in the use of the term in the past 30 years, *koinōnia* remains largely centred around Christian theology and fellowship. There is limited research on *koinōnia* despite calls for more clarity on how to create *koinōnia* (Stephanides, 2022).

Given this context, this study sought to explore:

1. How is the concept of *koinōnia* understood and applied within a Cambodian Christian context?
2. What can be gleaned from a Cambodian understanding and application of *koinōnia* that may support holistic development in a faith-based learning organisation?

### *Koinōnia* in a Cambodian Christian context

Despite Christianity first arriving in Cambodia in 1555 (Ford, 2017), Christianity in Cambodia remains relatively nascent. Early missionary efforts were generally unsuccessful and most later French Catholic missionary activity focused on Vietnam (Ford, 2017). Although Cambodian Protestantism celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2023 (Thompson, 2023), Christians still only account for up to 2% to 3% of the Cambodian population (United States Embassy in Cambodia, 2023). Despite their small size, Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) and NGOs operate approximately 228 religious (and mostly Christian) schools in the nation (United States Department of State, 2017) and a sizeable number of Christian medical facilities (United States Embassy in Cambodia, 2023). The presence of FBOs like the social enterprise in this study positions Christians to significantly contribute to community development and nation-building in Cambodia.

As with other Christian communities, the Cambodian church emphasises Scripture as a basis for their faith. While mirroring aspects of earlier Greek thought, biblical authors also broadened the concept of *koinōnia*. The term *koinōnia* in Scripture is derived from κοινός (*koinos*) which speaks of something held in common. From this base, derives *koinōnia* (often translated as fellowship) and *koinōnis*, or those engaged in *koinōnia* as partakers (Matt. 23:30, 1 Cor. 10:18, 2 Cor. 1:7, 1 Pet. 5:1, 2 Pet. 1:4), partners (Luke 5:10, 2 Cor. 8:23, Phm. 1:17) and companions (Heb. 10:33) as they share a common identity grounded in language, ethnicity or faith (Kärkkäinen, 2007). This identity was ideally expressed in an egalitarian community the apostles hoped to create in the church (Neufelder, 2012). This is shown when Luke states in Acts 4:32 that “the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common” (NKJV). This common faith and property was the basis

for a horizontal and communal relationship with each other and a vertical relationship with the divine (Oprean, 2021). Table One summarises the use of *koinōnia* in English and Khmer.

**Table One: Use of *koinōnia* in Scripture**

Verses referring to <i>koinōnia</i>	English terms used for <i>koinōnia</i>	Khmer terms used for <i>koinōnia</i> *	IPA translation
Acts 2:42, 1 Cor. 1:9, 2 Cor. 6:14, 2 Cor. 8:4, Gal. 2:9, Eph. 3:9, Phil. 2:1, Phil. 3:10, 1 John 1:3, 1 John 1:6, 1 John 1:7, Phm. 1:5	Fellowship	សេចក្តីប្រកបគ្នា or ការប្រកបគ្នា (Fount of Wisdom, 2022)	<i>Sæckdøy</i> <i>prakaap knie</i> or <i>kaa prakaap knie</i>
Rom. 15:26	Contribution	វិទ្យា (Institute Bouddhque, 1967c)	<i>Rey knie</i>
1 Cor. 10:16, 2 Cor. 6:14, 2 Cor. 13:14	Communion	សម្ព័ន្ធវង្ស (Khmer Online Dictionary, 2023b)	<i>Sampvæn vuəŋ</i> <i>Mien camnaek</i> <i>Sæckdøy ruəp ruəm Knie</i>
2 Cor. 9:13	Distribution	ផ្តល់ (Institute Bouddhque, 1967a)	<i>Pdal</i>
Phil. 1:5	Fellowship	រួម (Institute Bouddhque, 1967b)	<i>Ruəm</i>
Heb. 13:16	Communicate	ចែកចាយ (Khmer Online Dictionary, 2023a)	<i>Caek caay</i>

Table One illustrates how *koinōnia* has no direct equivalent in English or Khmer but can be described as sharing, communion, participation and contribution (NKJV). A common Khmer translation is ‘*sæckdøy prakaap*’ which broadly translates to ‘fellowship’ with God or a Christian community. For this reason, *koinōnia* is almost exclusive to Luke-Acts and the epistles as these books explore the concept and foundations of the church. While this gives some context and basis for *koinōnia* in Cambodian Christian communities, Wyatt and Welton (2022) found Christian faith and interpretation of Scripture were significantly shaped by local

culture and beliefs. More research is needed to understand how Cambodian culture has shaped Cambodian Christian perceptions of community.

### Koinōnia in support of Cambodian education

Despite earlier studies suggesting *koinōnia* may help in developing or recovering nations like Cambodia (Marumo, 2019), there is a dearth of literature exploring *koinōnia* in Cambodia and few current and contextualised Cambodian studies to directly draw from. Studies have conceptualised *koinōnia* in a Catholic education context (Lachner, 1978), illustrating how *koinōnia* can be more broadly applied but with little relevance for any contemporary study or a Cambodian context. Another study explored how a Cambodian ESL teacher, his US-based class of Khmer adults and their children created a supportive classroom community (Hardman, 1999) but did not directly relate this to *koinōnia*. This study and others focused on learning communities, demonstrate how these can improve learner achievement (Lichtenstein, 2005) as learners are more likely to succeed when the pedagogy encourages cooperative learning (Summers & Svinicki, 2007). Some studies even proposed instruments to measure classroom community (Rovai, 2002). While all these dated studies do not directly refer to *koinōnia* in contemporary Cambodia, they suggest a learning community – possibly in the form of *koinōnia*, can support or improve learning.

### Research design

The study applied a grounded theory approach as it best fit the study context of limited Cambodian research, cultural-linguistic barriers and the absence of a pre-existing model, definition or use of *koinōnia* in the Khmer language. In Straussian grounded research, researchers avoid an extensive pre-research literature review (Glaser & Strauss, 1999) and focus on making meaning from emerging evidence. To do this, the primary author undertook initial interviews in English where he asked questions to recognised custodians of Khmer and/or Christian culture based on the term and concept of *koinōnia*. The researchers then worked to make meaning from these interviews and refine key terms and associations after these had emerged and been broadly defined in interviews and subsequent focus groups.

The use of grounded theory meant we approached the study curious and careful to explore where the evidence led rather than postulate and test a hypothesis. This approach precluded the use of cultural tests – which are often criticised as being permeated by cultural and ideological perspectives (Verma & Mallick, 1988) and encouraged us to use broad questions in semi-structured interviews. In addition to meeting the Cambodian government's ethical requirements for research, we made provision for all data collected in this study to be stored securely for seven years and for the study to apply ethical guidelines. To minimise any

biases and preconceptions, the primary author used a reflexive approach where he maintained a journal to document personal reflections and coding decisions.

### Participant selection

The study was conducted in two phases. The first phase interviewed a purposive sample of eight expatriate and Cambodian Christian ministry or technical and/or vocational education leaders with most having taught marginalised students. Four participants were Christian ministers experienced in vocational education (two Cambodian and expatriate males and females), one was a Cambodian theologian (male), one was a Cambodian manager and vocational trainer (female), and two were NGO managers (one Cambodian and expatriate female). All participants were adults and all expatriates had lived in Cambodia for over 20 years. Lastly, all participants understood the study was voluntary and they could decline to respond or withdraw at any time (no participant withdrew from the study). A participant summary with English pseudonyms is given in Table Two.

**Table Two: Interview participants**

Variables		Cambodian	Expatriate
Gender	<i>Male</i>	3	1
	<i>Female</i>	2	2
Education	<i>Vocational diploma</i>	1	1
	<i>Undergraduate</i>	3	-
	<i>Postgraduate</i>	1	2
Occupation	<i>Ministry leader</i>	2	2
	<i>Manager</i>	3	1
Sector	<i>FBO</i>	2	2
	<i>NGO</i>	1	1
	<i>Seminary</i>	1	-
	<i>Business</i>	1	-
Names of participants in this study		Belinda, Charlie, Manfred, Sam, Victor	Alice, Michael, Rachel

The second phase facilitated two focus groups with a purposive sample of four teachers (group A) and four students (group B). This phase sought to validate the emerging model and learner responses and to identify further strategies in how to implement these. All participants in the focus groups were Cambodian adults selected for their lived experience in teaching and/or learning in Cambodian higher education which made them distinct from interviewees who served in various Christian ministries. These focus groups helped broaden perspectives on how learning within a Cambodian context which was important as no women from the social enterprise were available for interviews or focus groups. In place of this, the study triangulated information from students, managers and social workers. A summary of focus group participants is given in Table Three. To differentiate between interview and focus group participants, Khmer pseudonyms were assigned to these participants.

**Table Three: Focus group participants**

Variables		Focus Group A	Focus Group B
Gender	<i>Male</i>	1	3
	<i>Female</i>	3	3
Education	<i>Undergraduate</i>	1	6*
	<i>Postgraduate</i>	3	-
Occupation	<i>Student</i>	-	4
	<i>University lecturer</i>	2	-
	<i>Vocational trainer</i>	1	-
	<i>Secondary teacher</i>	1	-
Names of participants in this study		Channary, Rithy, Socheat, Sokha	Chhorvon, Dara, Leakena, Manet, Mony, Vimean

\*Note – these students are currently completing a bachelor programme.

### Data collection and analysis

Steps were taken to ensure the study met the required ethics and quality measures. Participants were provided with an information sheet and interview schedule of likely questions, and they signed a consent form stating that they understood and agreed to the study requirements. Interviews were conducted in English and in-person in a quiet space

and away from distractions or online while focus groups were conducted online in Khmer by a Khmer researcher. Recordings and transcripts of interviews and focus groups were made available to all participants and a draft report for review which interviewees indicated accurately captured their beliefs and opinions. Initial coding was developed based on the research questions and used to create open codes that were analysed to create axial and selective codes. A reflective process of coding, summarising and journaling was then used based on the principles of storyline (Birks et al., 2009), to develop a theoretical model that had credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

## Towards a redemptive community

This section analyses interviews and focus groups to answer the two research questions and explore how *koinōnia* is understood and applied within the Cambodian Christian community. We then consider the challenges to fostering these in a Cambodian context and propose a curriculum for the social enterprise.

### Understanding *koinōnia* in Cambodian Christian communities

While participants understood the term *koinōnia*, few used the phrase regularly. This was particularly true of Cambodians who used the Khmer term 'prakaap' and not *koinōnia* to describe fellowship. Yet even prakaap is unfamiliar to many Cambodians. As Victor said:

*Because Christianity came to Cambodia later, the term prakaap (i.e. fellowship) was originally... used by [translators of] the first Khmer Bible... Not many Cambodian people understand the term. If you talk to a non-Christian, they will have no idea what you're talking about (Victor, Pos. 5).*

An alternate term – ប្រិយសម្ព័ន្ធ or 'prai sauphorn', could be used but like prakaap, this is infrequent in Khmer conversations. As Victor shared:

*We don't understand what 'prai sauphorn' means because it's a technical term [for fellowship. Some] Cambodian or Khmer words... come from Indian Sanskrit... I'm not sure if the term koinōnia is heard from the pulpit or 'prakaap'. I'm not even sure how many pastors could explain [prai sauphorn]. I haven't heard of any (Victor, Pos. 7).*

While these terms may not have a clear definition for many Khmer Christians, these concepts are understood in Khmer culture. As Belinda said:

*I am also involved with counselling. Some [of the terms used for] counselling are hard to explain too. But [Khmer] get familiar with it when they know how it works. If you go to them and say 'prakaap', they may not understand [the term] just like they*

*may not understand counselling terms... [But] after we explain it, and I show them what it really means, [they get it] (Belinda, Pos. 25).*

While participants recognised that *prakaap* was a social term meaning 'eating together', they noted it had a spiritual dimension where people built deep and meaningful relationships that model Christ's love and service. Chhorvon believed fellowship:

*Can build up spiritually. Sometimes when we are alone and fall, it is hard to stand up again. Fellowship means we partner to share our testimonies. (Chhorvon, Pos. 7)*

While this relationship may occur in Christian and non-Christian groups, many participants believed there should be a unique dimension to this type of community in the Christian church. As Charlie said:

*There should be two [communities] at the same time. One is a normal community. The second will be a Christian community... When you have an intention to share Christ, you connect them to a community - we call it a Christian community (Charlie, Pos. 18).*

This Christian community is distinctly Christ-centred, intentional in fostering deep relationships to disciple other Christians and practical in expressing its faith. Participants pictured this fellowship to be akin to a loving family. As Michael shared how:

*We have testimonies of individuals [who see his ministry] as their forever family. They understand family in a Cambodian context, but... this is a deeper family because they feel more loved and accepted within this family (Michael, Pos. 4).*

While separate, participants did not see this faith community being exclusive or closed. In contrast, all participants felt the broader *koinōnia* community was designed to feed into the faith community. Rachel explained how women:

*[Engaged in the faith community because] of how they're treated. They're treated with this unconditional positive regard - love, care, etc. and they just soak it up like sponges... They're hungry to know more about this. So, they come to church because they've already been captured in their hearts by this love and kindness [in the broader community]. They're very receptive (Rachel, Pos. 25).*

While Rachel highlights the inclusive nature and strength of the broader community, several participants emphasised that membership in the broader community does not mean automatic transition to a faith community. Individuals must choose to transition to a faith community, and some people are unable to transition into either community. The challenges in building both communities and facilitating a transition to a faith community are discussed later.

## Development of *koinōnia* communities

Consistent with the nature and occupation of most participants, *koinōnia* was often perceived in the context of ministry and education. Alice – a pastor and an educator, shared how there could be contextual overlap between ministry and education:

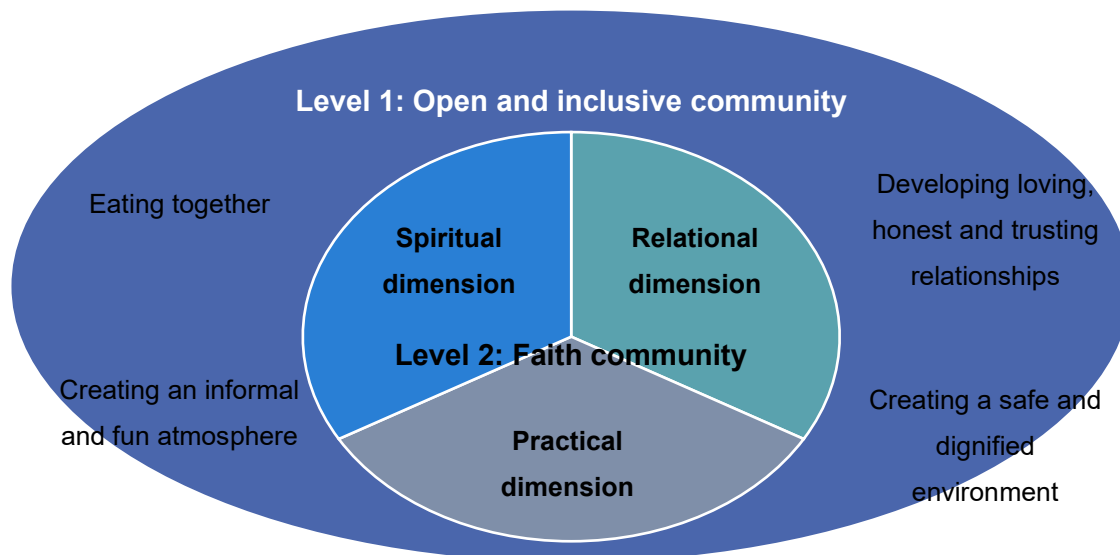
*I've always seen [koinōnia] as a core understanding for relationship. It's a good word that describes what a relationship would be... So that's why I think koinōnia is a very important word in the Christian [ministry] context and in education, as you build relationships in schools (Alice, Pos. 2).*

Developing *koinōnia* in both contexts occurred in two levels with the first focused towards developing an inclusive community and the second focused on a faith community. While most participants experienced *koinōnia* in a faith community, several participants recognised that fellowship also existed outside of a faith community. As Socheat shared:

*People [who] are non-believers have fellowship as well but in their own way. For example, [in Cambodia this could be] partying, having friends over, doing a Khmer BBQ, having food - that's all a kind of fellowship (Socheat, Pos. 8).*

A summary of this model and the key dimensions is shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Development of *koinōnia* in a Cambodian context**



## Creating an open and inclusive community

All participants recognised the importance of an inclusive community that fostered strong relationships. For Dara, *koinōnia* brought unity as it means:

*We do one thing together in one direction... [Koinōnia] unites us even if we are from different places as we have one goal and try to reach it together. (Dara, Pos. 2)*

While *koinōnia* had no consistent context or starting point, almost every participant linked *prakaap* with a fellowship that came from eating together. As Rachel shared:

*Sharing of food creates a sense of [koinōnia]. [In our workplace, it creates] this sense where it's not just the staff treating me with kindness, but my peers treating me in this kind way... Food is definitely a factor in terms of fellowship (Rachel, Pos. 5).*

While recognising a relationship between fellowship and eating, Channary noted how:

*I don't see fellowship as only related to food or eating, but how people meet together. The purpose is [important as fellowship can be about] remembering how they miss each other, and they want to see each other (Channary, Pos. 10).*

While eating together could be non-religious and festive or Christian and associated with Communion, many undergraduate students like Leakana emphasised the importance of maintaining a fun or informal atmosphere which centred around interpersonal relationships. For Alice, this is important because:

*I watch [Cambodians outside these communities] when they're with one another and I see the hurt... in their face. I think the challenge is to recognise that there is a thing called *koinōnia*... [and] *agape* love. This is an experience that you can have. Most of the time it must come through experiences (Alice, Pos. 15).*

While Alice ultimately hoped to bring people into a faith community, she first aimed to create an inclusive community. All participants believed this level of community was characterised by loving relationships that offered genuine compassion and support. For most participants, this relationship reflected fellowship like that of a Cambodian family. Belinda shared how:

*In Cambodia, we focus more on relationships than knowledge. This means you are loved more [for who you are] than [what you] know... [Teachers must] start with true fellowship through unity, like in the family... [For Cambodians] the heart is what we lost in our broken history. [It started] in the family [and went] to the political [domain]. Every area was affected. That is why we need *koinōnia* (Belinda, Pos. 2).*

In recognising the need for community, all participants highlighted how this must be based on honesty and trust that was expressed in a safe and dignified environment. An attribute of this was confidentiality so there could be an authentic expression of personal identity and dignity. This was particularly important for Rachel and Sam as they worked with marginalised and exploited women. Rachel shared how:

*[Women in our context have] zero self-esteem, zero hope in their life and zero sense of their identity besides being a sex worker who is trying to seduce customers... Because of this, they start to experience from day one this crucial element of unconditional positive regard. By that, I mean being treated with dignity, spoken to with kind, fair and nice words and being taught skills kindly (Rachel, Pos. 3).*

As an educator and social worker, Sokha felt trust was essential given the study context:

*I think for women - especially Cambodian women, if we have a problem, we don't want to share. We will hide. I'm also a woman. I know this well. For us to help these women... [you must] provide mental support and build trust. Trust is very important for a woman, but how we can build that trust is difficult (Sokha, Pos. 50).*

Despite representing different contexts, all participants believed Cambodians need to belong to inclusive, safe and loving communities that create genuine fellowship and acceptance based on reciprocal feelings of trust.

### Creating a faith community

The heart of a faith community is a desire to grow in a personal relationship with God and others and is expressed through practical, relational and spiritual dimensions. For most participants, this spiritual dimension was found corporately in reading Scripture, worship and prayer. Students like Manet, Mony and Vimean associated this with discipleship that fostered mutual, humble and honourable interpersonal relationships through sports, road trips or other joint activities. Alice shared how:

*[In] those moments, you can really help others understand what agape love is or how [it] can change a situation... I feel my life is me living [koinōnia] and telling stories, [whether this is] frequently telling stories in my Bible lessons or using samples of people in the Bible who absolutely were able to have koinōnia (Alice, Pos. 15).*

All participants believed deep *koinōnia* relationships can shape interpersonal relations and enable transformation when people model Christ-like behaviours and responses. Charlie called this the 'transformed life' and believed this must be reflected in a faith community as:

*A [Christian community] must have different means [of living] and not just a difference of possessions. There should be change in the characteristics of your behaviour, how you relate to people, the way you talk and model your family... For me, [this] community must be Christian (Charlie, Pos. 20).*

This faith must also shape how the community engages each other. Michael believed a faith community must have a relational dimension that encourages candid and deep sharing so:

*Individuals start talking about [their struggles so], freedom comes, healing comes, understanding comes... [I sometimes] comment... "go deep or go home" because our groups are only going to go as deep as a leader goes deep (Michael, Pos. 6).*

Alice, Belinda, Rachel and Sam also shared this sentiment. Michael also shared how:

*To go deep on a real level... requires a whole deeper [level of] community and... no [culture is] there yet. This is a biblical model of [community]... [as Jesus spoke] about community and bringing people together (Michael, Pos. 18).*

Like Charlie, Michael believed a faith community must be transformed and communal. An aspect of this communal life that was a practical dimension that shared resources. For Manuel, a *koinōnia* community resulted in:

*Sharing resources like [in] the first-century church; like the resources that they put at the feet of the disciples. [They then asked] "How can this resource [be] used to expand God's Kingdom?" (Manfred, Pos. 5).*

While participants described faith communities differently, all participants believed faith communities must deepen members' faith, develop deep interpersonal relationships and serve others practically. While all participants recognised the value of a faith community, they also realised this was not possible or practised in Cambodian Christian communities.

### Challenges in building *koinōnia* communities in Cambodia

Most participants discussed how *koinōnia* communities require careful cultivation over time and are not always successful. Challenges to creating and growing a *koinōnia* community came from incompatible socio-cultural or personal beliefs and values that conflicted with the Christian faith or historic trauma that came from past abuse. Alice shared how this left one student unable to understand how to do deep interpersonal relationships. She shared how:

*I'll never forget that experience where he was fighting over [the idea of koinōnia]. When I encouraged the idea of koinōnia and [deeper relationships], he was getting hurt... Why should I get hurt? Why should I do this? When I explained it [he realised] that it's either you feel nothing, or you can feel cared for and important [while also at times] you can feel rejected (Alice, Pos. 8).*

Similarly, Sam shared how in her work with trafficked women:

*Past situations [in the life of these trafficked women] means they cannot think about anything wider because they feel nothing changes... and they live without positivity... I want to say to them "[you can be] a role model, a decision maker, and an independent woman" and encourage them (Sam, Pos. 4).*

Belinda also felt this was a problem as many of the women she worked with came from broken families. She shared how:

*We need a lot of patience... grace... [and] love to... relate to or reach these people and to bring them into fellowship. In Cambodia, we love fellowship. If you let them feel that you love them, it is enough... They want to be loved in the area where they're missing love (Belinda, Pos. 19).*

Rachel also shared how these women were most likely to leave their programme early as:

*They haven't quite understood that this is a community that can help them... If they make it past the first month, they don't leave because by then they have experienced the love, care, kindness and community... But in the first week, they're still in fight or flight mode (Rachel, Pos. 35).*

Most participants also noted how the longer a person was in an inclusive community, the more likely they were to stay and transition to a faith community. While these challenges reflect the need for an inclusive community, it can be difficult to find or cultivate inclusive communities as this trauma continues to be felt – even in churches. Alice shared how:

*Students would say to me, "You're so different than my pastor... if I say something that he doesn't like, he starts yelling at me and it's really hurtful. It makes me angry. I want to yell at him, but I can't cause he's older"... They're coming from the provinces [with stories about] the pastor [and] this is the only pastor they knew. It [feels] like a lot of that has changed. It's not as bad now as before (Alice, Pos. 13).*

This example was an exception and most participants had positive experiences with church leaders who helped develop inclusive communities. Rithy, a Cambodian pastor, shared how:

*[Koinōnia] requires a good example. [I provide this example to]... a lot of men who I fellowship with... I often check with them to find out what they want to do... then I [organise events like volleyball]... and have the men pray... and talk about God... [If I make a mistake, I]... apologise and say "Sorry, it was me who made the error". If they slip when playing, I spend time with them and bandage up their wounds. [In this way] we always talk and worship together (Rithy, Pos. 28).*

Although most participants perceived church leaders positively, Charlie, Michael and Manfred believed the process of building inclusive communities was still a real issue in contemporary Cambodian churches. Manfred shared how:

*The problem [in churches] is... 'institutional design programmes' [so] that we miss the fellowship and relationships we need to build the Kingdom (Manfred, Pos. 17).*

Other participants also noted how Cambodian churches often failed to build an inclusive community. Several participants linked this to shifting work patterns and a decline in the perceived value of community in Cambodian villages. Victor shared how:

*Khmer [used to] have the Buddhist temple context and they lived in the same village and the same group. But in the city, people are from different places. This makes for different ideas of a community and no common definition... Everything has changed because, in the village, mostly middle-aged people leave the village for jobs. Only their elderly or older people are left (Victor, Pos. 95-97).*

Supporting this transition can be hard as Khmer often face personal financial pressures which makes them more likely to avoid or leave communities. Michael related how:

*One of my leaders has two jobs. He still volunteers but... he's exhausted. Both of our Khmer women leaders work two to three jobs. They're exhausted but they've experienced freedom [in our community], so they want to be a part of it (Michael, Pos. 20).*

While Cambodia has improved socially and economically, significant challenges remain in creating and fostering *koinōnia* communities.

## Discussion

The attributes of a faith community largely reflect how *koinōnia* is described in Scripture. The first time *koinōnia* appears is in Acts 2:42 (NKJV) where Luke says the church:

*Continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers... Now all who believed... had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.*

Luke described how this *koinōnia* community had a common theology and worship (i.e. spiritual dimension), shared resources (i.e. practical dimension) and strong interpersonal relationships (i.e. relational dimension). The framing of *koinōnia* by Cambodian Christians demonstrates how Cambodian Christian communities have contextualised Scripture to their local context. This is positive given findings also showed the term *koinōnia* to be infrequently used and poorly understood – a situation mirroring other church communities who also wrestled to understand and apply *koinōnia* (Marumo, 2019). While evidence suggests it is possible to cultivate *koinōnia* in Cambodia, community leaders will benefit from further teaching and resources.

The concept of concentric communities reflects earlier Greek ideals for *koinōnia* that strove for a plurality that balanced the complexity of human interaction, inclusiveness and

collectivism. Like Greek communities in the Delian League who based *koinōnia* on a common Greek identity (Stephanides, 2022), this may support a flourishing Cambodian society as it provides a sense of Cambodian community and identity. While *koinōnia* communities in this study had a common ministry and/or education focus, they could plausibly focus on other interest groups. As larger or broader *koinōnia* communities are likely to be more impersonal, harder to manage and potentially less inclusive, these groups would likely benefit from integrated faith communities.

While often overlooked, concentric *koinōnia* communities are evident in the ministry and communities of the first-century Greco-Roman world. In each city, Paul engaged with different communities including philosophers (Acts 17:19), politicians (Acts 13:7; 25:23) and various religious leaders (Acts 9:1; 23:2) with varying degrees of success. His approach was to initially engage Jewish communities (Acts 13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:1, 10, 17; 18:4, 19) to form a Christian community within and from this group but when rejected, turned to other *koinōnia* communities (Acts 13:46; 18:7,8). The interwoven and close connection of Jewish and early Christian communities meant many Christians retained a strong Jewish identity and prayed and worshipped in the Temple (Acts 2:46; 3:1; 4:1; 5:20, 42; 21:26) and near other Jewish communities (Acts 16:14; 17:17; 18:7). From the life and ministry of Paul, we see tiered and interwoven aspects of *koinōnia* in the polis, temple, synagogue and church communities. In these examples, we see that the Early Church had a faith community within other *koinōnia*.

The interwoven nature of secular and faith communities requires care so there is genuine inclusivity and diversity of individuals yet authentic and orthodox faith. Participants in this study resolved this tension by describing separate communities as they felt inclusive and faith communities each emphasised a common but different common. A similar parallel exists when Paul reconciles differing roles and gifts within the Christian church in 1 Corinthians 12. Paul highlights a diversity of gifts, but the same Spirit (v4) a diversity of activities, but the same God who works all in all (v6) and a body with many members (Jews and Greeks, slaves and free) but one Spirit (v12 and 13). This common God who works in all provides a central reference point to the *koinōnia* community and sense of identity. Likewise, a shared Cambodian culture could create a common reference that enables diversity and inclusivity while allowing an authentic and connected faith community.

Despite common ideals, inequality will emerge in a *koinōnia* community in time as it grows. Though emphasised, this was evident in the social and communal hierarchies between learners and teachers, congregants and pastors and workers and managers. Community inequality was also present in Athens with its classes and in the Early Church with its divisions of Jews or Greeks, slaves or free (1 Cor. 12:13) and rich or poor (1 Cor. 4:8-13). While Athens *koinōnia* permitted class inequality, Stephanides (2022) argued this was

moderated by jointly emphasising public honours and merit. In practice, this meant fairly and pragmatically balancing inevitable inequality with ability, from a perspective of collective outcomes and with individual dignity. Paul demonstrates this in 1 Cor. 12:12-31 by emphasising individual members (e.g. hand, ear and eye) and the collective body. For Paul, individual 'weaker' parts are essential and less 'honourable' parts are dignified since the collective is more important than the individual. Based on this, Paul then ascribes ministry roles and hierarchy. While it is unclear if and how this was applied, outcomes are mixed with different *koinōnia* communities being egalitarian (Acts 2:42), while others had schisms (1 Cor. 11:21). While this may broadly link to modern debates of equality of opportunity and outcomes, *koinōnia* is distinctive in pragmatically considering collective benefits, honour, merit and human dignity.

While the context of *koinōnia* communities described in the study differed, all evidence emphasised that these require loving, honest and trusting relationships in a safe and dignified environment. One way to create an inclusive *koinōnia* community – what Prefontaine (2023) calls a 'safe container', could be by fostering an informal environment based around shared meals. In time, this may allow for a 'dialogic circle' with 'no sides' (Prefontaine, 2023) by building deeper and reciprocal relationships that serve each other and explore faith. The proposed curriculum seeks to facilitate this journey through peer-to-peer learning, reflective questions and a supportive redemptive pathway. Despite the success of similar AA and CR programmes, it is too early to know how successful this programme will be.

Findings suggest *koinōnia* communities in the villages, families and churches are threatened by shifting social trends. The issues of labour migration in Cambodia are widely recognised (International Organization of Migration, 2018), but little consideration has been given to the impacts on churches and Cambodian Christians. Participants felt *koinōnia* communities may influence personal and collective identities – a finding consistent with other studies (Haule, 2015), and may reduce access to safe and meaningful relationships – a factor that could increase mental health issues (Park et al., 2023). Furthermore, as this study highlighted the importance of trust in a *koinōnia* community, it is unclear how these changes will shape future social relations between community groups, businesses and the government given these can be tense (MacPhillamy et al., 2022). While the study has insufficient evidence to answer these questions, it suggests Cambodian society can benefit from faith communities building and maintaining *koinōnia* communities.

## Towards a redemptive curriculum and further research

Drawing from these insights, the social enterprise developed an accompanying curriculum to support redemption in the marginalised communities served by the social enterprise. The curriculum drew on Freire's social constructivist approach (1970) so learners challenge their dehumanisation in a confidential learning community through conscientisation, a process where learners question their reality and sense of dignity. The pedagogy was modelled on Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Celebrate Recovery (CR), existing peer-to-peer recovery programmes focused on alcohol, smoking, drugs and depression recovery (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2023; Celebrate Recovery, 2023). Like AA and CR, it has a spiritually inclined 8-step recovery pathway based on the Beatitudes and *imago Dei* and drew from Henderson's *No Ordinary People* (2015) to be inclusive of diverse backgrounds, faith traditions and cultures by allowing inclusive language to explore questions of God and spirituality. The programme is also designed to be facilitated by a trained psychologist or counsellor who can work individually with learners to provide or coordinate additional support services.

The research also drew on the study to inform how lessons are conducted. In keeping with these findings, lessons are centred around food, personal reflection and trusting relationships that support and restore learners socially and relationally in a learning community as they reintegrate into society. The 90-minute lessons are based around the eight foci of the Beatitudes, which were chosen because they helped exemplify human and Kingdom values, with three lessons in each module. Each lesson opens by reviewing the programme purpose, the Serenity prayer and the programme guidelines and principles. Following the introduction, the facilitator shares a redemptive concept, and learners share their prepared personal reflections on this concept and their current development. During this time, learners can share their reflections, thoughts or concerns without interruption or group crosstalk. Following personal reflections, the facilitator introduces a short lesson on emotional intelligence with key terms, a short explanation, an activity and a reflective discussion. Lessons conclude with a simple assessment so learners articulate what they learnt and provide feedback, a closing prayer, and a short introduction to the next session.

While focusing on educated, urban Cambodian Christian communities align with the context of the social enterprise and may inform learning in Christian tertiary, vocational and higher education, it limits the study's generalisability. The study omitted the experiences of provincial Cambodian Christians who represent approximately 75% to 85% of the Cambodian and Christian populations (National Institute of Statistics, 2020) and at-risk or trafficked women who are future learners. The study findings could be strengthened by

exploring provincial and uneducated Christian communities and considering how these findings are relevant for approximately 97% of Buddhist Cambodians. Further research should validate the programme's effectiveness by interviewing marginalised learners and graduates in Khmer about their learning expectations, experiences and outcomes from the programme in their redemptive journey.

## Conclusion

The *koinōnia* model presented offers insights to Cambodian leaders as they grapple with the past and transition towards being a developed nation. While the Cambodian context may be unique, the concept of *koinōnia* presents a powerful model to other leaders for fostering inclusive communities that have genuine fellowship, a safe and dignified environment and are based on loving, honest and trusting relationships. Lastly, this model signposts to faith leaders and communities what true *koinōnia* is by emphasising the importance of spiritual, relational and practical dimensions.

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